

Behind the Scenes: The Webster-Ashburton Treaty

Political Dealings

Webster and Ashburton had to include the states of Maine and Massachusetts, which had once “owned” Maine, in their negotiations. It was difficult for Ashburton to comprehend the idea that states’ rights could dictate the actions of the national government. He commented to Webster:

“I contrive to crawl about in these heats by day and pass my nights in a sleepless fever. In short, I shall positively not outlive this affair, if it is to be much prolonged. I had hoped that these gentlemen from the northeast [Maine and Massachusetts] would be equally averse to this roasting. Could you not press them to come to the point, and say whether we can or cannot agree? I do not see why I should be kept waiting while Maine and Massachusetts settle their accounts with the General Government. . . . Pray save me from these profound politicians, for my nerves will not stand so much cunning wisdom.”

G.T. Curtis, *Life of Daniel Webster*
(New York, 1889), II, 113 n.
(July 1, 1842)

The delegates from Maine and Massachusetts finally left the negotiations when each was paid \$150,000 after agreeing to a boundary line. Webster and Ashburton were finally on their own.

Daniel Webster, as Secretary of State, was the only Whig in President John Tyler’s Cabinet. The rest had all resigned. After President William Henry Harri-

son died after just one month in office, Vice President Tyler became president. Tyler showed his Democratic leanings and blocked legislation passed by the Whig-dominated Congress. This complicated the political landscape. Webster was the only Whig who stayed at his Cabinet post. He remained Secretary of State for two years because of his negotiations with the British.

“At a dinner given in New York City to Lord Ashburton, a toast to the President [Tyler] was announced. No one stood except the British guest and his suite. When the health of the Queen was proposed, the assemblage arose and gave three cheers.”

C.M.
Fuess, *Daniel Webster*
(Boston, 1930), II, 117-118

Details of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty

The Treaty resolved border issues between the United States and Great Britain that had lingered since the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

1. The border between Maine and New Brunswick was a compromise. The British wanted land for a military road and retained 5,000 of the 12,000 squares miles of land in dispute. A concession was made by the British to the Americans who had started to build a fort on the Canadian

side—by mistake. This fort was referred to unofficially as “Fort Blunder.” It was officially known as “Fort Montgomery.”) Lord Ashburton extended the American boundary to accommodate the Fort, allowing extra land for New York and Vermont along the 45th parallel. (Additional reading: <http://apnmag.com/summer2004/fort-blunder.htm>)

To defuse tensions between lumberjacks in Canada and hypersensitive American state militias, (see the “Aroostook War,” <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0804810.html>) Ashburton granted Maine farmers and lumbermen free access to the St. John River.

2. In addition to the resolution of the Maine boundary, a problem lingered from the Treaty of Ghent—a disputed boundary between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods. (Refer to *Map of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty*.) Lord Ashburton, to compensate the United States for their Maine concessions, gave about 6,500 square miles of Canadian land to the Wisconsin Territory; which eventually became the state of Minnesota.

What the Americans did not realize at the time was that the Mesabi Iron Range, one of the most prolific iron ore deposits in the world was a part of this concession. What a bargain! ■